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## Battle for 'forest oil deposit': 23 bodies recovered, 18 villagers still missing – Akwa Ibom monarch

ON FEBRUARY 26, 2017 12:48 AM / IN [SPECIAL REPORT](#) / [COMMENTS](#)*Attackers were heavily armed, we could not fight back'**Oku Iboku falsely laying claim to Okposong river – Cross River elder*

By Emmanuel Una, Calabar &amp; Chioma Onuegbu, Uyo

THERE appears to be no end in sight to the perennial communal war between the Oku Iboku people in Itu Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State and their counterparts in Ikot Offiong in Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross Rivers State. The two communities have been at war over boundary for decades.

Oku Iboku people claim that their ancestors, out of benevolence, welcomed the Ikot Offiong people to their land and gave them some portion to farm and also allowed them to freely fish in their river, saying they are now claiming that the land belongs to them.

It was learnt that the dispute started in late 90s when Ikot Offiong broke into factions with one of them insisting on aligning with Odukpani in Cross Rivers State and at the same time claiming to be part and parcel of Oku Iboku.

The clan head of Oku Iboku, Ubong Essien Okokon, who spoke at his palace, lamented that his people had suffered untold hardship following the renewed crisis last December, adding that his people had been starving after being chased away from their homes and farmlands by those he alleged as armed men from Ikot Offiong now residing in Odukpani.



Chairman, Oku Iboku Clan  
Council,

“Since last December when the renewed crisis climaxed, we have been under siege. Most of my people whose homes were attacked in the crisis are staying upland here as IDPs because their property have been destroyed. Apart from those who were killed, many are still missing.

“I feel very bad because I am losing my people. All of us have become night watchmen, we cannot go to the river to fish, and our women cannot go to harvest from our farms because they are always harassed on the way to the farms by people from the other side.”

Community sources told *Sunday Vanguard* that about 18 indigenes who had gone to farm around the river side went missing.

“And some of the missing persons are strangers who have come to live among us. They are not people from Oku Iboku or Akwa Ibom State but people from other states of the federation”, one of the sources said.

When our correspondent visited the affected communities, it was observed that about six villages attacked during the latest crisis are those living close to the river side and one village in the upland area. The buildings were burnt to the ground, leaving the area deserted.

They include Ikot Emah, Essen, Uffa Oku, Uffa Ikot Ekpe, Uffa Obio Oku, Obot Oku and also Ikot Adakpan where the clan head hails from.

A survivor from Ikot Emah village, Mr. Enefiok Etim, who spoke at Ikot Essien where he was taking refuge in a church with his wife and five children, said, “The attackers came in flying boats. And it was when we heard them shooting that we knew there was trouble and all of us ran for dear lives through the bush.

“My beer parlour was burnt down. I could not recover anything; not even a pin. If we had wasted time there, we would have been killed because the assailants killed some of our neighbours. Our people have been displaced from their homes. We could not fight them back because they were heavily armed”

Another survivor, Mfon Edet, a fisherman from Ikot Essien, said: “We were attacked by Ikot Offiong people on February 11, 2017 when we went to fish. We were three and they shot and killed the other two persons. I escaped the shooting but I sustained a machete injury on my leg after which I fell into the river.

“The attackers thought the three of us were dead and left. When I saw that they had gone, I managed to swim to the shore and ran home.”

Giving insight into the dispute, the Chairman of Oku Iboku Clan Council, Elder Ability Peter Emah, blamed it on the refusal of the people of Ikot Offiong to stop claiming to be indigenes of both Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, noting that they even contest elections and take traditional leadership positions from both sides while still living in Akwa Ibom State.

He recalled that then paramount ruler of Itu, Edidem Ekpe Atakpa, made efforts to resolve the matter but he did not succeed.

“Because there were efforts to stop them, the faction that claims Cross Rivers and Akwa Ibom states at the same time resorted to fighting our people. The situation degenerated into mass killing which ignited the crisis of 1999. The war was fought from 2000 to 2004”, Emeh stated.

“But both state governments came in then and invited the Federal Government through the National Boundary Commission that set up a sub- committee to resolve the crisis. I was a member of that sub-committee .I coordinated that process because I have been a major political player in my area.

“Both sides resolved to reconcile following the peace move. In 2005, we jointly signed a document that we will not carry arms against each other again. We prayed, cooked and ate together after the reconciliation. And since that time, the two LGA have been co-existing peacefully.

“ And we have been farming together, trading and fishing together until December, 20, 2016 when Ikot Offiong people decided to attack us with sophisticated weapons killing our men and women, especially farmers and fishermen.

“As we speak, we have about 660 displaced persons who managed to escape the attack. Apart from the 23 bodies that we were able to recover, about 18 of our people are still missing. People have been reporting of missing. And they attack in broad day light when they know that our people have gone to farm or to fish”.

The Clan Council Chairman appealed to the federal and Akwa Ibom state governments to complete the rehabilitation of the NDDC road which has been abandoned by the contractor, stressing that if that road had been completed, it would have averted a lot of killings because security agencies were unable to reach the affected villages in time due to inaccessible road.

Some of the victims of the attack in Akwa Ibom have meanwhile called on the federal and state governments affected to bring lasting solution to the perennial dispute by properly demarcating the boundary between Akwa Ibom and Cross River states.

They also demanded that security be beefed up by setting up a military task force to oversee the waterways, particularly around Ayahede, Uruan, Ikonoeto axis of Cross River State through which their attackers usually come to their villages.

Separately, the deputy governor of Akwa Ibom State, Mr. Moses Ekpo, has reassured the people of Oku Iboku that the state government was alive to its responsibility of protecting them from aggression.

Ekpo, who is also the Chairman of the state Boundary Committee, spoke during a meeting with a delegation from Itu, led by Senator Anietie Okon at the Government House, Old Exco Chambers, on Tuesday, February 14, 2017, to deliberate on the way to resolve the communal dispute.

The deputy governor revealed that he paid a visit to the troubled area on Sunday, February 12, 2017, after the visit of the General Officer Commanding 82 Division

Enugu, General A. B. Abubakar, to the area.

He disclosed that the GOC had proposed a meeting of the two communities to resolve contentious issues.

Okon earlier told the deputy governor that the people of Itu were not on a territorial expansionist bid but that they were determined to protect their farmlands, waterways and wondered why the Supreme Court judgment that ceded certain areas of Cross River State to Akwa Ibom also made an inexplicable inclusion of an Oku-Iboku village in Cross River State.

Conflict so severe

Making their own case, Ikot Offiong people claimed to have 23 communities who live contiguously with the Oku Iboku people along the Anydeghe River and the Cross River estuary.

The Oku Iboku people, according to them, had always wanted Ikot Offiong to be part of them in view of their proximity and also to enable them appropriate the forest reserves on the Ikot Offiong axis. However, the Ikot Offiong people said they had always resisted this, leading to constant squabble. The conflict exacerbated in recent times following alleged presence of forest oil deposits along the Anyadeghe and Okposong rivers which Ikot Offiong believes is on its side of the boundary.

The conflict was so severe in the 70s and 80s prompting then governor of the old Cross River State, Dr Clement Isong, in pursuant to the enthronement of peace in the area, to adopt a Variation Order and gazetted it in the Cross River State laws for the transfer of Ikot Offiong villages from Itu LGA to Odukpani.

The Variation Order with Cap 5, CR LN No 5 1983 Supplement to Cross River State Laws with Nigerian Gazette No 34 Vol 10, dated 25th August 1983 titled:

Local Government, Clans, Villages (Variation Order) No 1 of 1983, transferred the 23 Ikot Offiong communities that were in Itu to Odukpani LGA.

Mrs Nela Andem Ewa, a former Attorney General of Cross River State and the counsel who handled the matter on behalf of Cross River State when litigations on the issue went to the Supreme Court, told *Sunday Vanguard* that the people of Ikot Offiong have all along been part of Odukpani and Isong enacted a law which endorsed it inspite of the efforts to force them to be part of Oku Iboku.

“The Variation Order enacted by Dr Isong who is an Ibibio (Oku Iboku) man himself empowered him to transfer one community from one local government to another within the same state because the people of Mbiabo (Ikot Offiong) said they would have nothing to do with people with whom they had no same ancestry as their lineage is with the Obong of Calabar and they had judgment to show that they had same ancestry with the Efiks”.

She said in 1987 when Akwa Ibom was carved out of Cross River, the people of Ikot Offiong were still part of Cross River and that when efforts were made to force them to belong to Akwa Ibom, they went to court and the Supreme Court, in 2005, upheld that the “transfer was based on fact and on law which makes it valid and that the decision by Isong to transfer the Efik communities to join their kith and kin in Odukpani was right”.

Chief Stephen Nya, an elder in the Ikot Offiong community told Sunday Vanguard that the National Boundary Commission, in 2005, then headed by former Vice President Abubakar Atiku, demarcated the boundary between the two states putting it in the Cross River, saying howevr that the Oku Iboku people are insisting that the boundary is at Okposong river which is about five kilometres into the Ikot Offiong side of Cross River.

“The crisis is driven by the quest of Itu (Oku Iboku) people to own Okposong river because they want the forest reserve located on that stretch along with the oil

deposit and not because they truly want the people of Ikot Offiong to belong to them”.

According to him, the conflict displaced the Ikot Offiong people in 2005 after which they relocated to Calabar but during the tenure of Governors Liyel Imoke of Cross River State and Godswill Akpabio of Akwa Ibom, a truce was reached and Ikot Offiong people told to return to their homes but Itu (Oku Iboku) people would not let peace be.

Nya explained that the latest crisis was as a result of the demand by Itu (Oku Iboku) people that Ikot Offiong people should pay them royalty before fishing in the Cross River which is the boundary between the two states.

Oku Iboku people, he claimed, first launched attack on them three weeks ago and they were repelled and that since they would not let peace be, they returned penultimate Saturday to kill many people and set houses ablaze beginning from the boundary of Cross River to Okposong river.

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